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ABSTRACT

Television's impact on children and the positive role of parents in moderating that impact is discussed in terms of: (1) the view that television has a largely negative impact on children; (2) the importance of television literacy; (3) ways in which parents are molding television's impact to their purposes; (4) variation in television's impact according to developmental age; (5) individual variation in children's responses to television; (6) variation in impact according to sex; (7) the impact of television on cognitive and perceptual development; (8) the issue of whether television viewing promotes a need for instant gratification; (9) television's presentation of the world as a mean and scary place; (10) television's promotion of conformity; (11) television as a source of information; and (12) the medium's prosocial impact. Variation in impact according to developmental age is discussed with regard to young children's integration of television sequences and time, the importance of visual presentation and enactment for preschoolers, the extent to which young children understand the motives of television characters, the extent to which television promotes empathy, ways in which children understand reality on television, effects on elementary school children, and the relationship between television and children's imagination and language development. (RH)

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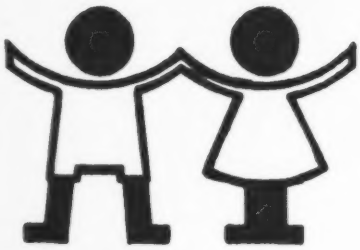

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TELEVISION'S IMPACT ON CHILDREN AND THE POSITIVE ROLE OF PARENTS

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TELEVISION'S IMPACT ON CHILDREN AND THE POSITIVE ROLE OF PARENTS

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In discussing the impact of the media, one could address the responsibility of the television networks in producing television for Australian children. There are many programmes which interest and entertain large numbers of children. Others are not quality products aimed at the child's perspective. Why children are subject to much of the latter involves a lengthy analysis of vested commercial interests and entrenched views of the second class status of children in the market place. As consumers of T.V. we all have a reponsibility to bring pressure on the networks to improve television fare for our children. This process is a slow one and, while we must ensure it takes effect, it might be more fruitful to look at ourselves as parents and /or professionals who work and live with children and our role in the impact the media has upon them. With this in mind, this paper discusses some aspects of the perceived impact of television on children and looks constructively at the role of parents in that impact.

THE VIEW THAT T.V. HAS LARGELY A NEGATIVE IMPACT ON CHILDREN

There has been a decline in T.V. watching in the western world over the past few years, probably because the novelty has worn off and people are better educated. At the same time grownups are rather more satisfied with adult viewing than they used to be (Comstock 1986). They are however less satisfied with the impact of television on children and many believe that children would be better off without it. Some ban television viewing for their children, some do not have sets and some restrict it severely. There is much confusion, even a sense of hopelessness, about what one can do as a parent.

However as they do in many other areas, parents can, and many do, control the impact of television and mould it to the values within their family. Television is now part of life and learning to live with it and its basic literacy is part of the educative process of growing up.

There are organisations and programmes to help parents understand the impact of television, but many tend to concentrate on warning parents about its negative impact. This is not always a very practical or useful approach (Holman & Braithwaite 1982). If television viewing is the prime parental form of leisure and if parents are not willing to acknowledge its educative effect, programmes which emphasise its negative effects are of little practicality and relevance.

A rather more effective approach is to begin with positive information about child development. The public is enormously interested in the effects of television on children, and most parents are interested in how children think and perceive and keen to guide their children's television viewing from that basis. For example they find it practical and interesting to discover the extent to which young children misunderstand the motives of television characters, and the developmental progress of the understanding of motives. Also of interest is young children's confusion arising from time concepts; for example when very young they believe each person has an idiosyncratic

influence over time, and in primary school their judgements of time sequence in other epochs may be disordered by salient events. For example a century, in which more events or more colourful events are presented by a teacher, may be deemed longer than any other, or because the concrete activities of the Stone Age are often more realistic to children than the way political events of other ages are presented to them, they may believe that it was more recent than the middle ages. Since the advent of television, modern children, whilst they are developing their own concepts of time, are faced with a medium which does not always temporally order events, and may switch rapidly back and forth between years, decades and perhaps centuries.

There is also a developmental sequence in children's understanding of personality and the perspective of others (Phillips, 1983). Much of television's soapies and dramas require an ability to take the perspective of others which is not yet developed in childhood. These developmental diffferences will be discussed in more detail later, but first some comment on T.V. literacy is necessary.

THE IMPORTANCE OF T.V. LITERACY

We live in a society which worries about print literacy, yet, except in schools which have good media programmes, society at large does not emphasise the importance of television literacy. This despite the fact that there is considerable learning involved in understanding the symbol system of television. Even the process of learning to watch takes several years. An important impact of television is that children develop cognitive skills in learning and decoding the novel sign system of television. As parents we are often unaware of the process and are fascinated when given information about it and can put it to good use in helping our children be in command of television's impact, rather than the reverse.

Television literacy involves learning to break a continuous stream of sights and sounds into meaningful units, learning to recognise formal features, such as sad music or a speeding train as signifying some meaning within the story, and learning to focus on important facts and to ignore others. For example not locking a car is most often not significant on a T.V. programme. One also needs to be able to draw inferences to fill in important meanings, (for example racing into a burning house may imply a rescue not actually shown) and to apply knowledge of the real world to T.V. and vice versa (Pingree, 1984). T.V. literacy involves knowing that soap opera families are not like real families and understanding the persuasiveness of advertising. One has to learn about frozen shots, slow motion, split screens and zooms and what they are intended to imply. Such conventions of T.V. have to be learned, just as literary conventions have to be learned. Children need help from parents in interpreting these, as it cannot be assumed that repeated exposure is sufficient.

Singer and Singer (1981) describe a school programme which they developed to increase television literacy. Lessons were designed to teach children the difference between reality and fantasy, real people, realistic people and fantasy figures and to understand special effects such as dissolve, edit, zoom, cuts.

The children learnt about commercials and how advertising techniques were used to enhance products and who pays for them. They learnt how television works and how television characters could "disappear". They also learnt to understand how television influences our ideas and feelings, how it presents violence and when it is real and not real. The programme also encouraged children to control their viewing habits. Unless children and adults are aware of the "grammar" of television images, they are vulnerable to its visual propoganda. They need to be taught to interpret and analyse.

This is not always a parental responsibility. We know that older siblings largely control the television when parents arn't watching (Zahn & Baran, 1984). Older siblings who have been educated in the literacy of television's impact can assume some responsibility for the explanation and discussion with younger siblings, although it must be remembered that they themselves still need the same support but for a different stage.

WAYS IN WHICH PARENTS ARE MOULDING TELEVISION'S IMPACT TO THEIR PURPOSES

There is now considerable attention paid to the role parents can play in moulding the impact of T.V., and there is evidence that not just co-viewing, or sitting with one's children during television viewing, but discussion and directives about specifics acts and events, seen on T.V., has a beneficial effect on children. This particularly applies to helping younger children distinguish reality from fantasy, especially where the fantasy is disproportionately frightening. It has also been shown that adult commentary can inhibit or intensify children's imitative responses of things seen on television, that mothers' comments can counteract children's tendencies to follow the dictates of a T.V. commercial, and that adult commentary can enhance. children's comprehension of a T.V. programme as well as their retention of information and values presented on TV. However it must be emphasised that it is explanation and discussion of <u>specific</u> aspects of the T.V content which is most effective (Prasad & Rao, 1978; Collins, Sobol, & Westby, 1981; Corder-Bolz, 1980; Ball & Bogatz, 1977). For example it may be important to discuss whether the Star Wars taking place on the television could take over the back garden or whether there are solutions to a conflict, other than the violent one depicted in a particular programme. Of course more research is needed on children's specific responses to help parents and producers, but there is already a good pool of helpful data.

I witnessed an example of parental effectiveness recently in Auckland at a showing of E.T. to a theatre full of children, ranging in age from 2 years to 12. E.T. can be lots of fun for 8, 9, and 10 year olds and above all adults, but its theme of separation from home can be very frightening for preschoolers, as can its symbolic violence in hospital scenes, police chases and the like.

One four year old sitting next to me was often frightened, but her mother, instead of issuing the usual general directives which help children not at all, such as: "Don't be a wimp", or "E.T. won't hurt you", as did some other parents, talked and explained specific aspects of the film, such as what was real, what was

unreal, who was going to help and even the devices used to make the film more scary.

Similar examples of the effectiveness of adult encouragement of television literacy in childhood and utilising its impact to encourage cognitive development, and active and critical participation, rather than passive absorption, can be seen in school and home programmes which educate children about advertising. Very recently some colleagues observed the responses of children from a Sydney school to various ads for Barbie Dolls, war toys and the like. The school from whence they came runs a very good media literacy programme, which includes constructive thinking about advertising and the parents reinforce it. In contrast to children from some other schools, they were not confused or deceived by the oversize presentation of the products and recognised the persuasive devices of advertising. Nor were they frightened by mechanical heads that split open in one ad, an event which can frighten preschoolers and young primary children. Such fear is typical because their self concept is as yet very physical and scenes of bodily damage can set special anxieties in train (Phillips, 1986). The children from the Sydney school had been helped by their parents and teachers and understood that the ad was fantasy. This was unusually advanced television literacy for children of this age. This is not to say all the responsibility lies with parents. Advertisers need to be sensitive to the vulnerabilities of developing children.

VARIATION IN IMPACT ACCORDING TO DEVELOPMENTAL AGE

This issue and the earlier example, drawn from E.T., brings up the question of the variation of impact according to developmental age. For example things that scare preschoolers may delight older children. Eight, nine and ten year olds like practising with a little fear; they are beginning to poke fun at some of the ridiculousnesses and unfairnesses of adult society; they are beginning to know adults and their parents are sometimes imperfect and foolish, all of which is portrayed in E.T.

While there is considerable hard data from other fields of research, much more reliable data is needed on the variation of television's impact on children, according to developmental age. Part of the problem is that the field of research into children and television is bedevilled with commercial pressures, and researchers who approach children primarily with an adult media or an adult sociological methodology rather than beginning with a child's perspective. Many such studies attempt to probe children's memories and use a deficiency model, with little understanding that children organise and retrieve information differently from adults. A deal of the existing research procedure is innappropriate for children. Some outcomes of this situation are conclusions that television has no effect on children. We can't conclude that there are no effects because we can't find them, if research is done from an adult perspective, is confined to effects models or is geared to the "generalised" child rather than individual children.

Despite these inadequacies, there is existing reliable data which indicate that the impact of television viewing varies with different periods of development (Watkins, 1985). Because

children at different stages of development think and learn differently (Phillips, 1986), inevitably they enjoy and are affected differently by the same type of programmes at different ages. These changes are not simply a matter of prolonged exposure. Until the subsequent qualitative integration takes place, the child thinks in the way that is idiosyncratic to whatever stage of development he or she is at, be it toddlerhood, preschool, lower or upper primary school or adolescence.

Young children for example do not think in abstractions. They do not induce and deduce according to adult rules of logic from verbal explanations or from being told about things they have not yet experienced. Thus they value the presence of an adult for interpretations and explanations of things seen on television (Murphy, 1983). Toddlers and preschoolers in particular relate everything to their own activities and need repeated experiences through them. For example one toddler wept when he saw an ad on television for a car of the same model and colour as the family car, which was obviously being driven by someone unfamiliar. He thought not only that it had got into the box and couldn't get out, but that it had been taken by someone else. Showing him the family car in the garage did not convince him and whenever he saw the ad he persisted in the belief that it had been transferred to the box and ran to the garage to check.

The problem is that toddlers and young preschoolers do not understand the logic of classification. A "look a like" car is therefore the same car. Not until this child, through his own play with groups and classes of blocks, toys and utensils, came to understand the rudiments of classification, did he cease to be worried by the ad. However as a young preschooler he remained puzzled about more complex aspects of classification such as why an old lady on the T.V. was called Mummy. Old ladies could only be grandmothers like his. Children do not understand the hierarchies involved in class inclusion until 8 or 9 years. (Phillips, 1986, pp 62-3).

Young Children's Integration of Sequences and Time on T.V.

Hayes and Kelly (1984) argue that preschoolers also have difficulty in integrating auditory information. They may remember very few of the central events in a television programme. Collins (1982) estimates that even 8 year olds remember no more than about two thirds of explicitly presented content that adults judge as essential to understanding a story. This is probably not due to poor memory but that they must infer and integrate material presented only implicitly by camera techniques, or the content includes abstract psychological concepts which are not understood until later (Phillips, 1986). Nevertheless they are making their own sense out of these programmes and adults rarely understand what it is, because egocentrically they do not grasp that children think in a qualitatively different way from adults. The failure to pay attention to this means that money being spent on television for children is not always spent in the most cost effective way.

Another aspect of the omission of things that adults see as essential, is that young children do not see the necessity to order their world in an integrated adult way. Thus they do not always associate interscene events (Collins et al 1978). Interscene associations involve understanding complex cause and

effect relations, which may not be understood until late primary school. In order to understand a television drama children need to comprehend what caused the main character's action, what the character did and what the results of the action were in sequence. In recounting a story young children choose at random events which are salient because of their own experience of them. They have little regard for adult type sequence or critical elements (Berger, 1983).

After three years of age, they begin to understand who is the central character and who are the subordinate characters who interact with them, but these need to be few and the action needs to be very simple and around domestic issues of which the preschooler has had experience. After five yeas of age they begin to understand that the plot has a beginning, a middle and an end and can structure their account of a simple story seen on T.V. in this way (Fein, 1978). It is not until 8 or 9 years that children integrate subplots to the main theme, conserve parallel stories and organise the whole story into discrete episodes (Fein, 1978).

Preschoolers tend to believe that the world always was and always will be the way it is now. They are incredulous when television presenters describe past events, for example a time when there were no cars or washing machines. Nor do they understand that their own growth follows a stable pattern. For example young children may believe that a forthcoming birthday will cause a dramatic transformation and are very much let down on the day to find nothing much has changed (Stone & Church, 1983). One child selected to appear on a preschool television programme was later very let down and confused when the excitement of her parents and the emphasis of the producer, that this was very important, led to no dramatic changes.

Preschoolers, as mentioned earlier, have difficulty in understanding temporal order. For the preschooler time is tied to particular events. A toddler may order things according to his or her particular whim or wish. Their fantasies are evoked for temporary interest, immediate self satisfaction or as an expression of their feelings (Piaget, 1969). Reality is subjective and the necessity for objective order and detail is not yet understood. Thus, although one event may occur prior to another on television, the child sees no need to maintain that order. In retelling stories they see on films, five year olds add people and objects not in the film. They embellish stories with their own imaginative people or ideas.

They retain emotion charged associations, for example being knocked over by an aggressive dog, as time markers. Their memory tends to be in the form of eidetic images or isolated facts, without context and continuity. Stone and Church (1983) believe that the continuous past is lost to young children's memories, not because it is repressed, but because it is submerged in constant reworking of their knowledge of self and the world. For these reasons preschoolers will not necessarily see the links which a producer attempts to portray in a television programme. They find it difficult to generalise. Because their own experience is central, they remember isolated incidents which relate to that experience. It may be years before these isolated experiences are integrated into a unified concept. They also need plenty of active experience outside television to develop

such integrations.

Leifer et al (1971) found 4 year olds essentially unable to put even a few pictures from a familiar fairy tale in order. Seven year olds did well with short sequences. However Pingree et al (1984) point out that the ability to order may be different from a predisposition to use the order of events on a television show to make sense of it. They argue that children understand more than adults appreciate, although it may be a qualitatively different understanding. For example Collins et al (1978) report that 7 year olds inference making was totally unaffected by jumbling the order of scenes. Thus they seem to make no use of time order in understanding television.

It is clear that children make a lot of sense out of what they watch. They often include in their recounts, things not noticed by adults or not considered essential by them. Moreover they may spontaneously find analogies between words and events, that to the adult mind have nothing to do with each other. Such syncretic thinking (Piaget, 1969) means that the child finds reasons for every chance event and connects everything with everything else. Children in this state go straight from premises to conclusions without intervening steps of deduction. It is first evident in a child's perceptions and later after 7 or 8 in his or her verbal intelligence. This does not mean that there is necessarily a substantially different understanding of the plot from that of the adult. Sometimes the details enrich the story.

Pingree et al (1984) found that overall children understood programmes although their recounts avoided abstract discussion and there are fewer details. However such observations stem from situations where children are watching reasonably clear and simple shows. Such conclusions do not apply where the story is largely abstract. Much more research is needed on the processing and integration activities required in television viewing.

<u>The Importance of Visual Presentation and Enactment For Pre-Schoolers</u>

Hayes and Kelly (1984) demonstrated that preschoolers recall the order in which a series of events is presented on T.V. better when the segments are presented visually rather than aurally. They asked preschoolers to observe a Scooby Doo cartoon in which events were either temporally or causally related and were either purely visual or purely auditory in presentation. However visual presentation in adult style does not help. This is because preschoolers believe in the way things look, rather than logical deductions. This is best demonstrated by Piaget's and Inhelder's famous water pouring experiment (1969). Young childen will agree that two tall thin glasses contain the same amount of water, but if the water from one glass is poured into a wide short dish, they will not agree that the quantity remains the same.

Choat (1984), citing Bates, raises an important question as to whether most television is not geared to the concrete stage of thinking, typical of late primary school and early secondary children and whether television for the preschooler has remained basically the same as it is for these groups and concrete thinking adults. Preschoolers need to be actively involved in the presentation while viewing, but most producers see them as a

passive audience. For example Pingree et al (1984) report some research in which preschoolers view brief (30-90 seconds) stop action animation of dolls in simple stories and then re-enact the stories immediately, using identical dolls, props and sets. Five year olds did well and three year olds remembered the gist of the stories. They even understood some of the influences through cinematic conventions discussed earlier. This research implies that verbal questioning, rather than encouraging enactment, is a poor way of getting at what the child understands.

It also suggests that the traditional 20-30 minute programmes may be inappropriate for pre-schoolers. Even shortened versions of television programmes may be full of incidental actions, multiple trivia and a complicated or abstract story line. Processing the slightest television presentation requires complex abilities and integrations that are still to be learnt at this stage.

Do Young Children Understand the Motives of Television Characters?

Hayes and Kelly suggest that preschoolers do not recognise underlying motives of T.V. characters because motives are presented either implicitly or through dialogue or verbal narration. However the lack of recognition is probably more complex and related to the lack of abstract thought and developing self awareness. It is not until about 8 that children become aware of the inner subjective nature of self. Whereas the preschooler and the kindergarten child largely believe one is different because one looks different or has different material possessions, an 8 year old is beginning to understand that one also has different thoughts and feelings (Phillips, 1986).

They now begin to compare themselves and others in terms of qualities: "Dad's excitable. Mum keeps cool", rather than purely physical descriptions: "Dad's big. Mum is smaller". Thus psychological motivation and qualities will confound or be ignored by children until late primary school. For example Pingree et al (1984) asked 3-5 year olds to re-enact a story seen on television. They were very good at direct actions but an abstraction such as guilt felt by a young orphan, because he was now rich and his mother had been poor, was not comprehended.

An 8 year old is also beginning to understand that another person's clothing, hair or possessions may change, but they have inner qualities which remain the same. To use a Piagetian concept, the 8 year old can now conserve personality, just as earlier they learnt that quantities remain the same, even when they are poured into different shaped glasses (Phillips, 1986). Such developmental changes also explain why preschoolers do not always recognise the same character dressed in different clothes. Even 6 or 7 year olds may be confused when a character dies in one film and reappears in another.

These developments in understanding characters and motives throw some light on children's preferences at different ages. According to McCollum/Spielman (1985), by the ripe old age of 6, children have outgrown a great many simple characters that were their favourites earlier, such as Disney characters, Snow White, Pinnochio, Bambi, Sesame Street, Muppets, Hanna -Barbera characters, Yogi Bear or Bugs Bunny.

An Australian study found that preschoolers prefer Sesame Street, Playschool and Humphrey Bear or Bugs Bunny, with boys liking cartoons more than girls (Braithewaite & Holman, 1981), but by the time they are six, while still accepting them, children have outgrown them and found new favourites, which are more appealing to their stage of development. Models outside the family become important and boys begin to enjoy the heroic mode of character presentation and star wars characters or the Brady Bunch. These choices also coincide with the development of their understanding that their sex is a permanent feature. (Younger children believe that they can change their sex (Phillips, 1986). Girls are discussed later, but are largely deprived of the heroine models suitable for their sex, which is a necessary fantasy when children are learning to cope in an adult world and often feel incompetent.

By the time children are 9 there is generally another change in taste to preferring more "real" characters with some psychological depth and complexity. According to McCollum/Spielman and, contrary to the beliefs of many television producers, their fancy is not yet engaged with characters they consider too adult, such as the characters portrayed by Brooke Shields or Dustin Hoffman.

The Development of Empathy

Can young children empathise with or put themselves in the shoes of a television character who is experiencing fear for example? Young children can identify simple emotions such as happiness, sadness, anger and fear, but cannot necessarily be expected to understand the perspective of others experiencing such emotions, unless it relates to something in their own experience.

Wilson and Cantor (1985) believe empathy is linked to role taking skills which develop with age. For example they found that older children spontaneously reported imagining themselves in the shoes of a boy, pictured as fearful of being stung by a bee. They could decentre from their own perspective. Young children are likely to be dominated by their own fear of the bee as such and did not recognise fear depicted in the boy's face, unless the presence of the bee was explicitly associated with the boy's expression.

Understanding of more complex emotions such as guilt or jealousy comes later in primary school. For example, young children locate jealousy in activities and objects rather than people. Moreover young children do not consistently understand that a character may choose to display an emotion different from that felt (Knowles, 1984). Television programming for children needs to take such things into account. One of the greatest problems is that television for children is most often based on the reconstructed memories of adults.

Nor does having a child in a programme mean that a child's way of looking at things has been achieved. T.V. soap operas are saturated with children who say and do things children never do. Children usually recognise the falsity of such contrivances. This is why so many children's programmes, devised by adults from their perspective of children, rather than a child's perspective, are not popular with children. Parents can play a very important

role in detecting their child's disbelief and discussing the artificial, even hostile portrayal of children in some t.v. programmes..

How Do Children Understand Reality on Television?

Little is known about how reality cues are interpreted by children. Quarforth (1979) explored children's understanding of the nature of television characters by examining their ability to discriminate between human, puppet and animated characters. There was a predictable increase in discrimination skills as children grow older: 48% of kindergarteners could discriminate, 57% of 1st graders, 75% of 2nd graders, 85% of 3rd graders and 95% of 4th graders. Quarforth argues that if they are not discrimminating between real and cartoon figures, then the portrayal of high rates of violence in cartoon programmes may be questionable and giving preschoolers an undesirable picture of society.

Kindergarteners also seem uncertain about the mechanics of television and this also effects their understanding of reality. For example, Quarforth found that they didn't understand how the characters got inside the set and some believed the people were made smaller and then lowered down by a rope. Other researchers support these findings. It may be that camera effects such as zooms, split screen, wipes, use of chroma-key and special effects such as slow motion, fast motion and ripple effects may confuse children and interfere with their understanding of reality or fantasy (Blatt, Spencer & Ward, quoted in Singer, 1981). Snow (1974) found that while older children could identify cartoons as make believe and the news as real, there was split opinion about the Brady Bunch.

Children under four tend to believe that everything is alive as they are. This animistic thinking can lead to distress over some television events. For example several pre-schoolers were upset when a presenter jumped on a rag doll. The children had invested the doll with life and their own tendencies and the presenter was seen as seriously hurting someone alive like themselves.

Intuitive thought, which begins roughly at four years can distinguish between the inanimate and the animate, but does not follow the rules of adult logic. Thus at this stage children make an immediate interpretation of phenomena and find explanations in connections which constantly contradict one another. One pre-schooler refused to go to bed in case star wars broke out, after having watched the programme with an older brother. Although, while watching, he had explained to his mother that the characters lived in the sky, at bedtime he remembered one piece of the action which convinced him they were in the wardrobe. It became necessary to examine the contents of the wardrobe and provide him with a night light for many weeks. Adult logic did not and could not prevail at his age.

Primary School Children

It has already been indicated that primary school children understand much that the preschooler does not. They think in a qualitatively different fashion from preschoolers and from their adolescent brothers and sisters. By the time they are 9, they love shows which contain play on words and jokes where words

sound the same but have different meanings. They can classify and love classification games. They understand temporal order, distinguish fantasy and reality and can grasp much of adult logic, but only if it is presented to them concretely (Phillips, 1986).

For example a science show, which contains predominantly abstract hypotheses, purely verbal generalistions and deductions, will strike them as ridiculous. One presenter asked his primary school audience to suppose an egg was unbreakable. "Your nuts" the children shouted and fell about as though it was a fun thing, when in fact they were being asked to consider a hypothesis. Science shows which have a lot of concrete illustration, even the occasional disaster are, on the other hand, greatly enjoyed by primary school children.

Whereas preschoolers humour is limited to single actions or words and they often miss the point, primary school children love jokes and this involves skills not usually apparent in younger children: the abilities to listen carefully, to know what someone else will think is funny and to remember the right way to tell a joke. They love shows in which there are jokes that test reality, and riddles that trick adults. Dramas which involve a major trick are very enjoyable. For example one episode that is appreciated by primary school children, in the Super Gran series, is where a frozen chicken is substituted for a live pigeon and catipulted through the air in a pigeon race. The trick is discovered only because the perpetrator forgot to remove the price tag and the cooking instructions. Such absurdity which mocks reality is loved by older primary children.

Television and Children's Imagination

Parents are often concerned about the effects television has on children's imagination. In this context there are many reasons why mediation by parents is necessary to help children live effectively with T.V. In fact it appears that it is crucial. For example Singer and Singer (1981) suggest that imagination is related to parental attitudes and their child's viewing of less stereotyped high action adventure, commercial television type programmes. There are other relationships not connected with television, for example having an imaginary companion (Phillips, 1986). It also seems that such childen are less likely to be aggressive in pre-school.

Perhaps the encouragement of an inner fantasy life plays a counteracting role to the direct imitation of violent material. The Singers data also suggests that young children, who get into more difficulty at school, show less mature group behaviour and less imagination, are heavy viewers of violent shows, including cartoons.

Considering how much time children spend watching cartoons, we know very little about their impact. There is considerable speculation that the attractiveness of cartoons for children lies largely in their concrete presentation of fighting, running, chasing, rather than more complicated intrinsic qualities. Singer's and Singer's material suggests that children who are heavy viewers of cartoons are not stimulated in imaginative play.

What factors, by comparison, lead to increased imagination? Singer and Singer found that gentle, moderately paced and clearly sequenced shows, such as the Americam "Mr Rogers Neighbourhood" increase children's imagination and co-operation. This programme uses careful camera work to focus on objects in their setting, so that children understand their relative size, and it makes a clear distinction between reality and fantasy through the device of a trolley entering a magical kingdom. It was found that when children were taught make believe games and an adult interpreted events in the Mr Rogers show and directed them to focus on elements in the film, then children's imagination increased. The problem is that such programmes are rare.

Singer and Singer argue that to date very little effort has emerged from producers and educators to develop age specific programmes designed carefully to enhance an interactive, self generating playfulness in children.

Most parents acknowledge that their children copy things seen on T.V., for example singing commercial jingles, or gross motor imitations such as eating like Cookie Monster. Braithwaite and Holman (1981) found that many parents reported that older children idolised characters on T.V., particularly supernatural heroes, puppets and cartoon characters. These can all be used for imaginative games, providing sufficient supplementary provision is made for girls. Children idealise female characters less, probably because they are less often portrayed as heroic or major.

There is also evidence that some television viewing can help children, whose lives lack imagination and fantasy (Fein, 1978). However several researchers argue that, because television holds the attention by sensory bombardment and constantly changing visual sequences, which persistently call the child back to the television screen, there is no opportunity for periods of practicing make believe. Moreover psychiatrists are often concerned that achieving the celluloid presence of others, simply by pushing a button, makes it difficult to learn to establish genuine relationships. However again the parents can redirect this impact by teaching children to engage in imaginative pursuits arising out of television viewing, to analyse character portrayal on T.V. and to establishing good communication within the family.

One thing that worries parents greatly is the effect of frightening and violent television on their children and particularly preschoolers. Three to five year old children have a rich fantasy life which causes them to fear imaginary creatures and monsters. They sometimes create an imaginary companion who saves them from such manifestations and this can be healthy and lay the basis for a self supportive and independent way of coping. On the whole psychiatrists suggest banning frightening t.v. programmes and stories at this age.

Language

In a study of several television programmes for children, Rice (1984) demonstrated that the popularity of shows has as much to do with the style of the language as the visual impact. She is particularly concerned that some television programmes, designed for young children, do not provide dialogue suited to children's

linguistic competencies. The fact that Bugs Bunny is popular with very young children, she argues, is not simply due to the animation and a simple and humorous repetitive plot, but because it does not rely on adult like dialogue and abstractions.

Even certain grammatical conventions that adults take for granted can be confusing for young children. For example, although very young children use "because" they do not necessarily understand the causal and logical relation implied. When one presenter asked a child of 5 why a hexagon was not like a triangle, after another child had made a mistake in matching, the child said: "Because he is silly". The word " because"was used to give a psychological reason, rather than a logical one. Other explanations such as "Pre-school is not on today because the America's cup is running", was meaningless to a 4 year old who kept asking why. This child was not being deliberately annoying, but was asking why in an attempt of understand "because", "today" and "running" since "boats havn't got legs".

Similarly older children use the word "therefore", but don't really understand, until 11 or 12, that therefore expresses an empirical relation and a deduction, for example: "Billy has lost his pencil, therefore he cannot write". One child hearing Danny, a presenter, saying: "Maxine, our usual presenter, is sick, therefore I shall be presenting the show for a week", thought Maxine was sick because Danny wanted to present the show. The substitution of the causal "because" for the deductive "therefore" is frequent in children's interpretations and creates much confusion in their understanding of explanations.

Also difficult, until 11 or 12, is the understanding of "although", "even though", "inspite of" or "all the same". Such conjunctions express a concession, or a restriction on cause and effect, for example: "The horse ran fast, even though he had a sore leg". Hearing a statement from a presenter to this effect, a child thought the horse was running fast because it had hurt its leg, and was very puzzled. Again the substitution of the causal "because" is not unusual in a primary school child. At this stage he or she does not yet understand general laws and exceptions to them and is not sufficiently conscious of his or her own though processes to cope with formal logic.

INDIVIDUAL VARIATION IN RESPONSES TO IMPACT

Not only is there developmental variation in the impact of television on children but individual variation. A colleague in Canada (Bishop, 1984) summarises some of these variations. There are those children who appear to profoundly fix their attention to television, and whose eyes become glazed and jaw slack. Then there is the child who watches television while doing things, who talks to the characters, argues with news folk, acts out themes and who chides quiz show contestants. Their retention is better than the former. There are other children who watch T.V. on the run as it were - just taking in snippets here and there. Some children adopt all these modes at various times, depending on the programme, competing activities or their mood.

VARIATION IN IMPACT ACCORDING TO SEX

More recently, and this discovery has been somewhat of a shock to our previous perceptions, it has emerged that males at all ages watch more television than females (Hopkins and Mullis, 1985). This is probably because it portrays more male values and tastes. While this impact is often studied in the context of stereotyped sex roles, or cultural stereotypes of goodies and baddies (Abelman & Sparks 1986), some of the other aspects are not. One example is that boys are seeing ample models on television of men in power, doing active things, while girls tend to be malnourished or deprived of strong models in the media. Some producers of children's television are very responsible about this and try to provide positive T.V. images for girls; others portray the type of girls that appeal to male audiences, unconcerned about the alienation process. For example a dependent female who screams, rather than helps in a fight, may make a male viewer feel competent by contrast, but it does little to help the self esteem of the female child viewer.

The May issue, 1985 of Topline, the Child Research Services Division of McCollum/Spielman reported that the differences in American children's choice of media stars were very much segregated according to gender. For example, within the top 10 figures, the appeal of Sylvester Stallone, Mr T, David Hassellhoff, Richard Pryor and Jaws and Darth Vader and others from the Star Wars saga was heavily skewed toward boys. In turn, the appeal of Garfield, E.T. and Benji was girl dominated. E.T. and Garfield were the only characters who came close to approaching universal appeal.

Boys are inclined to prefer masculine, invulnerable, invinceable, strong arm, dominant, action figures who are on the right side of cataclysmic struggles between good and evil, unless they are characters that they love to hate, such as Darth Vader. A deal of children's programming, is centered upon action and conflict, which is fitted into masculine figures and appeals to boys. Girls mostly find them distasteful and prefer whimsical gentle creatures, often anthromorphised non humans, such as E.T., who require nurture, or fashion figures such as Michael Jackson and Barbie. It seems that these stereotyped preferences are a response to what the media provides and it certainly suggests that both sexes need new role models in the media.

There is also evidence that children of both sexes tend to report more agreement in co-viewing television with fathers than mothers. While the reasons for this are many, it seems to be an activity in which children can have some qualitative interaction with their fathers. It is conjured by many, that men find television an acceptable way to interact with a degree of intimacy which is comfortable to them, because it is less intense or emotionally demanding. Thus, in our parent programmes and research, fathers, and the impact of television on them, should not be forgotten, as many are watching with their children with little planning and input.

THE IMPACT OF T.V. ON COGNITIVE AND PERCEPTUAL DEVELOPMENT

One impact of television viewing on children, about which we do not know a great deal as yet, but which is arousing increasing interest, is its effect on cognition and perception. Some believe it is changing the way children think and see. Many suggest that television's quick paced stimulus presentation, brief sequences, extremely high rate of action (eg car chases) physical violence, and frequent intrusion of commercial messages, unrelated to the fiction, story or news content being presented, provide a very different experience for the regular child viewer from any stimulus available earlier in human history (Singer, Singer & Rapaczynski, 1984). Television, through a combination of sound effects, exciting music, and rapid action images, may induce some combination of generalised arousal and inability to cope with the self restraint and the normal delays or pace of natural life. The child who is a heavy viewer of television may not develop a capacity to take in long conversations or explanations, and the necessary details that characterise the non television or "real" world.

Even educational programmes, such as Sesame Street, have been criticised for the use of slick attention-getting techniques, which might encourage short attention span, hyperactivity and lack of interest in classroom activities which do not have entertaining qualities (Wright & Huston et al, 1985). It is also evident that some of this possible impact could be minimised if several television myths about children were dispelled - one being that frenetic pace keeps their attention. Children recall reasonably paced programmes better than they do overly rapid ones. They find frenetically paced programmes more difficult to integrate and sequence; they pay more attention to stories than they do to rapid, shallow magazine programmes which overview complex subjects in a matter of seconds (Wright, Huston et al, 1984).

DOES T.V.'s IMPACT RESULT IN A NEED FOR INSTANT GRATIFICATION?

Several studies indicate that children, who are more restless when a reward or event is delayed or who show more difficulty in waiting for something, than is developmentally appropriate, are children who over the previous years had been watching more violent action oriented television (Singer, Singer & Rapaczynski, 1984). However although T.V. watching seems to be the most important factor, it is not the only one. Other factors that play an interactive role are a family that stresses forceful discipline, and which is involved in more physical outdoor activities and imposes less restraint on the child's T.V. exposure.

Such a family in its disciplinary processes presumably sets a model of dealing with problems in a violent or immediately physical fashion. The child has no model or training in delaying action to consider choices or outcomes. Indeed procrastination of any kind is anxiety provoking for such children, since it invariably leads to parental reprisal. Much television is reinforcing the parental behaviour, for the typical television hero reacts with a quick punch or chase or immediate gratification, rather than planning, lengthy discussion or slow deliberation. It is little wonder that children who are

uncritically saturated with such modelling at home and on the media are impulsive and impatient. They learn to regard aggression as the only effective means of conflict resolution and to be indifferrent to suffering (Stein & Friedrich, cited in Holman, 1981)

One also needs, when talking about the impact of too much rapid paced T.V., resulting in a need for instant gratification, or sensation seeking and boredom, to take socio-economic variables into account, for we live in a highly commercialised society which honors instant gratification.

THE IMPACT OF THE WORLD AS A MEAN AND SCARY PLACE

There is considerable evidence that, regardless of age, persons who watch four or more hours of television each day tend to be significantly more suspicious of others and more afraid of being involved in violence than those who watch two hours or less (Gerbner & Gross, 1976), and that television violence helps instill in children a vision of the world as a mean and scary place (Singer et al, 1984). This applies to children who are heavy viewers of violent adult oriented television. Again there appear to be other variables involved, albeit to a lesser extent. There is perhaps more physical punishment in the family along with lack of exposure to a broader diversity of activities.

Children who spend time in enjoyable leisure activities, such as making puppets, learning to skate or fly a kite, or building cubby houses are presumably less fearful because they are doing things that make them feel competent and in control. One cannot control what happens on television, and thus it seems that incessant viewing of adults attacking others leads to the learning of fearful helplessness. Moreover adult violence is something children fear greatly, for they are vulnerable and dependent.

There is also increasing evidence that the impact of heavy viewing of violent T.V. shows, and a family that emphasises physical discipine and assertion of power, is related to later aggression in children (Singer, Singer & Rapaczynski, 1984). Again the reason for this in all probability lies in the modelling process and the frustration that being controlled by powerful figures can arouse.

In summary, in trying to describe the impact that television has on children, one cannot talk about simple relationships. The media happens in family contexts and social contexts and this must be taken ino account.

THE IMPACT OF CONFORMITY

Television is a dominant activity in our society. Its impact, along with other socialising processes, is to structure the way we behave and think. Overall the type of information presented by major production houses and news organisations is similar in political flavour and selection of stories. The content of programming to which children are most exposed, even in news, documentaries and educational programming, carries social values

that are highly repetitive and are differentiated only on superficial levels (Watkins, 1985).

For example, an analysis of the A Team by Anderson (1986), demonstrates how a popular programme perpetuates the myths of power and violence, which affirm the American way of life. He argues that this show reaffirms the maverick and vigilante stance that frontier America was based on. The A Team's message also makes it easier for the media to present American foreign policy as a continuation of the heroism of the Lone Ranger, that is as an unofficial agent of freedom and goodness in a wild and dangerous environment.

However television's impact is not simply one of providing conformist behavioural models for young viewers. Nor are we or our children passive recipients of it. It is part of the social environment with which adults and children choose to interact.

TELEVISION'S INFORMATION IMPACT

Television is also a rich source of information. Since the advent of Sesame Street in 1969, many of the functions, originally served by kindergarten and first grade, have more recently been served by a programme that children may view at home. Many argue that letter recognition, number concepts and early reading skills are now developed much earlier than they were twenty years ago. It is also said that television broadens one's outlook. For example, an inner city child can have exerience of farm animals; children of one nation may observe children of another nation. Whether this has reduced ethnocentricism or enhances cognitive development needs more research over time. It is also suggested that T.V. has extended the average child's vocabulary (Fakouri, 1984).

PRO SOCIAL IMPACT

Researchers, the community and parents also question whether television has any prosocial impact and whether it effects children's self esteem. For example E.T., which was mentioned earlier, portrays a child who is competent and achieves and understands things adults cannot and do not. The identification process, where experiences portrayed are such that the child feels they are within his or her experience, is believed to encourage self esteem. More research is needed about this particular impact. Television has also been used therapeutically to help children overcome fears and phobias, for example of dogs by seeing other children playing with dogs (Gunter, 1984). It has been used to inculcate self control, observation of rules, or restraint. However these programmes have all been specially designed. We do not know as yet how much of this children acquire from ordinary T.V. viewing and whether it generalises to other situations, although it is suggested by some that the viewing of Sesame Street increases co-operative behaviour.

CONCLUSION

In summary television's impact is that it is now well and truly part of our children's socialisation process. Like any other

socialisation process, we and our children are not passive recipients of it. We need to make our children television literate so that they can cope with it and are aware of its impact upon them.

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